

"GOING DOWN THE HILL."

BY LADY BRAY,

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"He will find beauty in the ripeness of age as well as in the blossom of youth."—*Meditations of Marcus Aurelius.*

"THREE score years and ten, three score years and ten," I kept repeating the words over in a sort of melancholy refrain as I sat by the fireside upon my seventieth birthday. I was not exactly unhappy, indeed I should have been the most ungrateful of mortals if I had been, for I had everything to make the childhood of old age a happy one. Loving daughters, merry little grandchildren, and a home of luxury and comfort. And yet—perhaps I may be forgiven if a vein of melancholy stole over me—I had reached the allotted age of the Psalmist, and henceforth there must be labour and sorrow, even the grasshopper would be a burden.

As long as I could say "sixty," it did not seem nearly so old, even "sixty-nine" was years younger than seventy. I was still active and brisk, my sight and my hearing were good; I did not feel old, and yet I was rapidly "going down the hill."

The fire was burning brightly, my chair was very comfortable, and there was a delicious fragrance from the hot-house flowers which had been showered on me for my birthday. I suppose I began to get a little sleepy for now the refrain of "three score years and ten" changed themselves into another monotonous measure "going down the hill, going down the hill."

Oh! how nice it was when we were "going up," though even then we were never satisfied, it was always "on, on," never standing still, always wanting "just one step more." The crawling baby stretching out arms and wanting to be the toddling child, the child hastening on to the schoolboy, the youth longing for manhood; no standing still.

"Hush! Grannie's getting sleepy," said the voice of my dearest little grandchild. "Poor Grannie, she is getting old now."

The voice did not disturb me at all; but only seemed to blend in with my sleepy fancies.

"I wonder" continued the little voice "how it feels to be old, I wish Grannie would not get old, I don't want her to one bit, oh! how funny it would be," here there was a little rippling laugh, "oh! it would be funny if Grannie were to begin to get younger again, and go on getting younger and younger until—" Here the voice seemed to fade away, and whether I just dropped asleep, or whether my spirit really left my body, and I floated away into another world, I cannot tell you. I must leave you to guess that for yourselves.

All I can say is, that I found myself wandering alone in an old-fashioned garden, full of sweet flowers, and the air full of the murmuring of bees. Where could I be? Everything looked quite strange to me. In the distance I could catch through the trees a glimpse of a large house, but I lacked the courage to go up to it and ring the bell to ask where I was.

All at once I heard voices, and looking up, I saw two ladies coming down one of the paths. A sudden feeling of shyness seized me, and I stepped behind some of the thick shrubs. What would they think of an intruder in their private garden? more especially one who could not even account for being there. The sound of their voices reached my ears, and one of them seemed strangely familiar to me, though I found it difficult to remember faces I seldom forgot the sound of a voice, and I was certain that the voice of the taller of the ladies was well-known to me. Where could I have heard it before? it must have been a long time ago, for it seemed to bring back to my memory old recollections.

I listened attentively, and all at once it dawned upon me. "Why it is exactly like Aunt Charlotte's voice; but no!" I added upon second thoughts, "that is quite impossible, she died ten years ago."

Still, though I knew it was utterly impossible that it could be her, I leaned forward a little trying to catch sight of the speaker's face, and in so doing revealed my presence.

"Why here is a new arrival," said the voice which was so familiar, "let us go and greet her." She advanced quickly, and in another moment we were standing face to face. I was more hopelessly puzzled than ever. Why it was Aunt Charlotte, and yet it was not the old Aunt I remembered, whose hair was snowy white, and whose form was bent with

age. This lady was old, perhaps about my age, and her hair was grey; but her figure was as upright as my own, and her step as active.

"Why it is never Jane Musgrave," she exclaimed, "welcome indeed my dear; but how you have changed since the last time I saw you."

I simply stood speechless for a minute, could it be her ghost which had risen before me.

"Is it Aunt Charlotte?" I gasped at last; "but she died ten years ago."

"Went away you mean, my dear Jane, we do not talk of dying here, it is considered vulgar. We pass away, we dwindle down, we disappear, but we do not die."

"But you did die," I repeated in a bewildered manner, "and how is it that I now find you here and so much younger than when I saw you last."

"I am younger," said Aunt Charlotte with evident pride, "I am ten years younger than when I left you, then I was eighty years old, now I am only seventy, why," and she laughed merrily, "you and I are just the same age."

"I cannot understand it," I said, "am I dreaming?"

"No! no! my dear, not dreaming at all, I do not wonder that you are puzzled. I was puzzled at first, but you will soon understand all about it, and be as delighted as I was when I first had it explained to me. You look tired, come and sit down on this seat and I will explain it all to you."

With a slight bow to me, her friend moved on, and she and I were left alone together.

"First of all," she began, "I must tell you that you are now in the land of Retrogation, and a most delightful country it is. You remember in that old world of ours how we were always moving on, never standing still, growing older and older, until at last we began to go down the hill."

My very words, I sat up and began to listen even more attentively.

"Here it is quite the contrary. Everything is going backwards. When I first came my hair was as white as snow, and there was not much left of it, now as you see it is only grey, and what is more," here she whispered quite low, "it is beginning to get thicker, I should not wonder if in a few years I shall be able to do without my tail."

"Your tail?" I repeated wondering.

"My tail of hair I mean, of course," she said rather impatiently, "oh, what a delicious moment it will be when I can say 'my last grey hair,' oh, the joy it will be to pass my hands once more through thick tresses. I used to have such beautiful hair when I was a girl. I count the years to the time when I shall be young again."

"Do you mean to say," I asked, "that we shall really grow younger here?"

"Yes, my dear, that is just what I do mean, younger and younger every day."

"Surely next year I shall be seventy-one."

"Not at all, you will be only sixty-nine, instead of feeling older and more infirm you will feel younger and stronger."

Sixty-nine once more. Certainly the idea did sound very pleasant, I remembered how sadly I had said good-bye to the sixties, and now, could it really be possible that my lost youth was gradually to be restored to me? I thought I had outlived all vanities, but in spite of myself I pictured a tall slender girl with ruddy gold hair and a slim waist. How well I remembered when my hair lost its gloss and began to look dull, and the first grey hair that appeared. It is true that I pulled it out and let it slowly frizzle in the candle, but nevertheless the grey hair had existed, and I could not think of it without a pang. Afterwards they grew common enough, and it was only when I used to take out of its paper wrapping a long bright curl to show my grandchildren that I could fully realise what had once been mine. A smile crossed my face.

"I see you are beginning to be pleased already" said Aunt Charlotte, "now just think, even to-morrow you will be one day younger."

"What day is it?" I asked rather irrelevantly, for I began to wonder how long I had been coming to this land.

"Saturday," answered Aunt Charlotte.

"Oh, then it is still my birthday, and to-morrow it will be Sunday, and I shall not be able to go to church with the dear grandchildren." Already I had begun to feel that there was a sort of want of something in this strange country.

"To-morrow will be Friday," said Aunt Charlotte, "not Sunday."

"But you say to-day is Saturday?"

"Certainly, but as we are going backwards the days go backwards also, yesterday was Sunday."

"And the months, do they also go backwards?"

"Of course they do, December is our first month, and then comes November, October, and so on."

"It is most perplexing," I said, "I wonder if I shall ever get used to it?"

"You will be quite surprised, my dear, to find how soon you get accustomed to it, and how eager you will be to grow backwards."

"It does sound very nice; but I suppose there must be some drawbacks. It will be very delightful to grow young, but I do not know that I shall care so very much about being a child again."

"That is just like the Jane of old days," said Aunt Charlotte, "why cannot you be satisfied and take things as they are, it is such a mistake when people are not contented."

"I do not think it is discontent," I replied, "but people ought to look at a thing on every side. I know that nothing can be quite perfect, but I do feel that it is a great disadvantage not to be able to go on improving."

"What nonsense," said Aunt Charlotte, "why that is the very thing we are all doing, we go on improving every day."

"Yes, in a way, Aunt; but then it is all improving backwards, now I like to be improving forwards."

"As if there could be any difference, really, my dear, if you are to go on improving forwards as you seem to wish you will very soon be as Shakespeare says, 'sans eyes, sans nose, sans teeth, sans everything.'"

I saw she did not understand me, she never did in the old days, but it was of no use trying to explain what I meant: that there is an improvement which goes on, yes, even though the bodily strength should fail, and the faculties begin to decay. Is not old age a lovely thing with its mature experience? The rugged angles of youth worn down; the quick eager spirit chastened and refined. Strange to say, I began to feel as regretful about my old age as I had done about my youth. We sat quiet for a few minutes, Aunt Charlotte seemed rather offended, and neither of us was inclined to speak.

The silence was presently broken by voices. "Dear me, how my arms do ache," some one was saying, "Grandfather is dreadfully heavy."

"So is Grandmother," said another voice, and two girls came along the path each carrying a fat baby.

"Come and sit down, my dears," said Aunt Charlotte, making room for them on the bench, "and let me make you acquainted with my dear niece, Janet Musgrave—a new comer," she whispered in a sort of aside.

I felt a little awkward, for really, I hardly knew what I was about, so I asked to look at the babies, and how old they were.

"Grandfather is just a year old," said one of the girls whose name I afterwards found was Julia Dent, "he is such a pickle and always getting into mischief, and such a weight, but one knows he will grow lighter every day."

"I think that is almost worse," said the other girl, Clara Reed, "when they are a year old they can sit up well, and seem to have some spring in them, now look what a lump Grandmother is, she lies such a dead weight in one's arms."

"Why do you call them Grandfather and Grandmother?" I asked, "it seems such a very funny way to speak of two babies."

The girls looked surprised at my question. "But they really are our Grandfather and Grandmother."

"I shall never make you understand Jane," broke in Aunt Charlotte, "do you not see that these two babies came here about seventy or eighty years ago, and that they have grown down into babies, and as these two grandchildren happened to come to this country at the time they were getting children, they were given into their care? We always try to place our children with relations, if possible, as they take so much more interest in them. How old were you, dear Julia, when you first came?"

"I was about thirty, and Clara was a year or so younger. How well I remember Grandfather the first day I saw him. He was about ten years old, and such a handsome, merry little fellow."

She gave a sigh, and I wondered whether it was really so nice as Aunt Charlotte described, to grow younger instead

of older. Was this new world really so great an improvement on the old?

The sigh was re-echoed by Clara. "Grandmother has only got four teeth left," she said, "look at them," and she displayed four dear little white front teeth; but there was none of the pride with which a mother displays her baby's first teeth. Clara knew that in a short time those little teeth would be gone.

"Grandfather was such a clever boy," went on Julia, "when I first had him he knew so much Latin and more Greek than most boys, and as for arithmetic, why, you could not puzzle him."

"And then?" I asked, and though Aunt Charlotte moved a little impatiently, I continued, for I was anxious to draw her out, "and then I suppose he began to forget?" Julia hesitated a moment, evidently this part of growing backwards was not often spoken about. "Was it not rather sad?" I asked, "when he began to know less and less, when the intelligence began to fail, when the boy's brilliance began to fade and—"

Here to my astonishment Julia burst into tears.

"My dear," said Aunt Charlotte sternly, "do you not know that tears are never permitted here, and that no one is allowed to have any regrets?"

"I cannot help it," exclaimed Julia, "I must speak sometimes, I quite ache with having to keep it in, you seem as if you had a heart," here she laid her hand in mine, "you seem as if you can feel. It is dreadful, it is a thousand times worse than the old world which everyone here abuses so much. Oh, to think that we are growing backwards, that day by day we shall become more ignorant, more childish, no more improvement; it is heart-rendering, and no one here seems to care."

She sprang up and clasping the baby to her, she kissed him with passionate tenderness. "Oh, my baby, if only for one year we could be back in the old world and I could watch you go on improving, what bliss it would be." She turned away sobbing, and Clara followed her.

"So it is not all pleasure in this land, Aunt Charlotte."

"I have no patience with the girl," she answered; "but there, some people are never contented."

"I think I can understand the feeling," I answered slowly. "It must be a dreadful thing to see no improvement, to go on from day to day as she describes, growing more childish, and forgetting all that one has learnt."

"I begin to wish that you had never come," said Aunt Charlotte, "I have always been so happy, and here are you, a new comer, upsetting all our orthodox ideas." She rose up, evidently with the intention of leaving me.

"Do not go," I exclaimed, "I do not want to vex you, let us talk it calmly over, perhaps you may convince me, do you remember how we used to like arguing and discussing in the old days?"

Aunt Charlotte smiled in spite of herself. "Remember, yes, I should think I do, and I also remember that I never was able to convince you. You were always very obstinate; but I must say that you do not seem to fire up now as you used to do. You have learned to take things more quietly, I suppose."

"I used to have a horrible temper, I know," I answered, taking her hand; "how often, dear Aunt, have I wished I could have you back that I might ask you to forgive me for many of my hasty speeches; you will forgive me now, will you not?"

"Forgive you, why, my dear, I never used to think of them again, but certainly there is no doubt that you have improved a good deal, you do not mind my saying so, do you; I am twenty years older than you."

Here she stopped suddenly, remembering in some confusion that we were now the same age, for whilst she had been growing ten years younger, I had been growing ten years older, so that we now met at the advanced age of seventy.

"I do not mind at all," I said, "and so you really think I am improved."

"Yes, decidedly, though you still keep to your opinions you are not so self-assertive, and you are much softened."

"What a pity it is that the improvement cannot last," I said, a little slyly.

"I do not in the least see why it should not," said Aunt Charlotte, falling into my trap, as you have begun to improve now I do not see why you should not go on doing so."

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"But, Aunt dear, you forget I have got to grow backwards, so instead of improving I shall begin to deteriorate." Aunt Charlotte looked thunderstruck, and had actually no answer to make.

"Oh, you see," I cried, my calm manner all swept away, "you see how dreadful this life is. Instead of going on with a high ideal before us, ever striving to reach up to it, ever striving to leave the past behind, and to press on to another future; we are to go back to the faults and follies which we thought we had left behind us; sin again the old sins, and awake to no repentance; sow again the bitterness of tears, and reap not the fruits of wisdom; with nothing to look forward to, nothing to reach after, we shall pass through this land of Retrogation, go back into the little child, and not even the child of the old world, a being with all its life before it, but an ignoble creature, with no possible future. Aunt Charlotte, I shall go mad, I cannot bear it. Oh, my old age, do not leave me, do not pass away. I would not lose even a day of you; no, not to return to all the beauty and strength of youth. Stay with me, old age, welcome all your infirmities, all your drawbacks; if you will only let me keep also the memories of the past, and the glimpses of the future."

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"Grannie dear! is there anything the matter?" and my youngest daughter laid her hand gently on my shoulder, whilst she pressed her lips to my cheek. "You seemed so troubled in your sleep, that I was obliged to wake you. I do believe that there are tears in your eyes."

"Oh, do not let me go back to that dreadful land," I gasped.

"What land, Grannie? why you must have been dreaming."

"And Aunt Charlotte, where is she, is she gone?"

Than all at once, I gave a little start and seemed to come back to myself.

Thank God, I was still in the dear old land of progression. I was in my own arm-chair, and my children around me. What did it matter if I was seventy years old, if my youth was gone, and my hair was grey? What indeed could anything matter?

"If God's design we now fulfil,
If here we work His holy will
And Angels be at last."

And so I am waiting very quietly now. I do not even feel that my life is a useless one. I see more and more that instead of the old people being of no use they have their place in life, and a very important place it is.

Are they not the very centre of the family? Do they not unite all the members as nothing else can do? The family may be broken up and scattered, and each may have his own separate interests. One speaks of my husband, and another of my children; but there is one precious word which seems to unite them all, and that is when they speak of "our mother."

Do you wonder now that I am happy and cheerful? I would not have any change, even if I had power to make it. My old age will lead me onward, ever onward, through the darkness into the light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day:—

"Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be."

The last of life for which the first was made:—

Our times are in His hand,
Who saith "A whole I planned,
Trust God, see all, nor be afraid."